

Media Concentrations - Presidential Appointments and Public Television

The Public Broadcasting System was founded in 1967 in order to provide Americans with commercial-free television. The struggle to attain it against the protests of already-entrenched mega-corporate networks was immense. So was the struggle to remove TV commercials for tobacco which glorified smoking and denied it was harmful to health. But PBS, which has grown hugely in the past thirty-five years, has not entirely sustained the public mandate for which it was formed.

PBS reports that it currently receives 12% of its funds from the US tax-payer and broadcasts programming to approximately 88 million viewers a week. Its statistics on viewers vary widely and are based primarily on faulty Nielson ratings. It solicits funds from viewers several times a year and receives funds from corporate sponsors for special programs. Its corporate advertising slogan, which reflects a deeper misconception of public television's role, describes PBS as a "private corporation funded by the American people."

Despite a meagre amount of funding by the US tax-payer, only slightly more than ten percent of its operations, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which distributes public funds for programming and production on PBS, is run by a Board of Directors appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the US Senate, who in turn appoint a President and a CEO. Its programming decisions, station management, and fiscal accountability are therefore a direct result of political or economic goals of the Executive and Legislative branches of government.

There seems little legal basis for having a public broadcasting corporation run by political appointees of a US President or Congress. The purpose of the Communications Act of 1934 was to establish a lawful basis for broadcasting to operate in the "public interest," not to have public broadcasting serve the interests of the political arms of government. Unlike corporations where "shareholders" may have a vote in decisions about corporate goals, finances, or practices, neither PBS viewers nor PBS member/contributors have a vote on who runs public television.

A list of current members of CPB's Board of Directors shows a shocking level of political, ethnic, religious, and governmental influence. Members of the Board of Directors include a former campaign worker for Sen. Slade Gorton of Washington (not re-elected), the founder of a Spanish-speaking network, a member of Jewish organizations, and an "information-technology" advocate. All of these members of the Board of Directors reflect special interests, either of the Executive or Legislative branches of government. None reflect any public interest or representation of the public, particularly in having broadcasting free of the dissemination of classified or top secret information from US intelligence agencies.

The only form of accountability the Board of Directors at CPB offers is: a) a comment page on its website to which personnel do

not respond and b) an "Inspector General" whose findings of fraud, waste, or impropriety which are based on statutes of the Legislative branch are turned over to an Executive branch appointee, the US Attorney General, at his discretion. It is a cosy world in which political interests control the policy, accountability, biases, economic rewards, and liability of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Public Broadcasting Systems without the slightest redress for viewers or the public.

Under such direct political control, PBS has become one of the largest broadcasting networks in the US. Its website says that it reaches "99% of American homes" in a one-month period. Its statistics, which are neither uniform nor accurate, are based on Nielson ratings acquired intermittently to determine the "demographics" of the audience public television, in imitation of commercial-marketing corporate networks, are trying to reach. PBS has no annual license review requirements - only Congressional appropriations reviews - and it has no due process complaint procedures and no public access laws for retractions, rebuttals, or corrections of mistakes. Instead, it advertises that its devotion of one-third of its funds to program production to maintain a round-the-clock penetration of American public airwaves.

The control of public broadcasting by a President or Congress which results in politically-controlled, corporate-sponsor controlled, or special interest controlled programming is not in the best interest of America. As a glance at PBS programming shows, the number, kind, and time-slots of PBS programs has not only grown in the last few decades, but deteriorated into special interest, audience-abusive, and repetitive programming which threatens to turn this "commercial-free" television network into a self-serving factory of fraudulent productions which violate its public mandate.

For example, in its bid to perpetuate its increasingly corporate, anti-public, unindependent, special interest programming PBS has produced a PBS Kids program called "Liberty's Child" which informs children that "today's journalism is tomorrow's history" to indoctrinate them with the knowledge that fraudulent media is a substitute for reality and the media take-over of children's minds is the only thing they have to look forward to. It also broadcasts a BBC production called "Telletubby's" which is designed to brainwash under-five children into believing that being a couch potato with a portable TV on your stomach is the future for English-speaking children.

It is unfortunate when the only alternative to monolithic, violent, sexually titillating, LCD, commercial broadcasting which PBS was designed to be - particularly when cable TV has been turned into commercial proposition - becomes a media monolith sponsoring propaganda about broadcasting, news, education, and culture which is intended to replace the constitutional, social, educational, and public institutions of America. Not only is a public television "network" which has expanded inexorably over the past several decades operating solely for itself and its political handlers, but its expansion threatens to overwhelm and excise other necessary institutions because of a systematic lack of accountability to the public for the special interests it is now serving.

When radio and broadcasting have been around for more than fifty years it seems time to reflect on whether more is better, if you've seen it once you've seen it a million times, and wall-to-wall video entertainment is in the best interest of the public. Never before in history has the massive promulgation of "entertainment" so dominated a society and, despite frequent subterfuges about media research studies caused by network interference, the evidence is that too much media is physically, mentally, and educationally deleterious. Surely, change in the illusion of endless fascination with media is overdue in the United States.

When the FCC reviews public comments about media concentration rules on June 2, it is important to include CPB and PBS in the list of media networks and chains whom such rule changes will impact. Sending a message to such large networks that it's "business as usual" or "more of the same" will only increase the callous and self-reinforcing illusion that corporate broadcasters do not have to operate in public interest and that their industry interests - and those of political and economic interests - are all that count in imposing fraudulent, offensive, or anti-social programming on the public.